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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes demands that confront elementary counselors: (1) a culturally diverse world; (2) changing families; (3) drug abuse; (4) child abuse and neglect; (5) exceptional children; (6) a technological world; (7) a changing world of work; (8) promoting learning in a changing world; (9) shaping children's behavior in a changing world; and (10) human relations in a changing world. (TE)

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DIGEST

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The Changing World of the Elementary School Counselor

Edwin R. Gerler, Jr.

Introduction

Elementary school counselors face changing demands as education and society move rapidly toward a new century (Gerler, Ciechalski, & Parker, 1990). Counselors must set clear priorities in the face of changing expectations. This digest summarizes various educational and societal demands that confront elementary counselors and suggests possible roles counselors may select relative to these demands.

A Culturally Diverse World

Our society faces challenges in accepting and benefitting from cultural diversity. Problems emanating from racism exist despite efforts aimed at educational reform. Elementary school counselors must be aware of transmitting their own cultural values to children and of drawing erroneous conclusions about children's emotional and social well-being based on cultural differences. Moreover, because counseling theories and techniques are not always applicable across cultures, counselors must often look to new and creative ways to work effectively in multicultural settings (Pedersen, 1988). Elementary school counselors should advocate for educational programs that include counselors, teachers, parents, and students working together for increased cultural understanding through role playing and other awareness activities.

A World of Changing Families

The so-called traditional family has virtually disappeared in America. Divorce and single-parent homes are a fact of life confronting children. Elementary school counselors must understand the effects of changing family structures and find ways to promote child growth and development within the context of family change. These ways will include divorce groups, training groups for single parents, guidance for latchkey children, and a variety of other important strategies. Elementary school counselors need to develop innovative approaches to help children and parents develop in a healthy fashion in spite of the ambiguity created by divorce and single-parent families. Counselors should assume a proactive stance by collaborating with teachers in developing and implementing family education programs.

A World of Drug Abuse

Students often begin to experiment with drugs in elementary school and early experimentation frequently leads to abuse and addiction in adolescence. Moreover, educators are aware of problems coming from families made dysfunctional by alcoholism and drug addiction. Elementary school counselors must understand the scope and implications of substance abuse and implement drug education programs that are designed to prevent drug abuse and to help children overcome the effects of substance abuse in their families. Elementary school counselors also need to recognize the serious effects of parents' alcoholism on children's development and implement compassionate approaches to helping these young victims receive help whether or not their parents are willing to accept help.

A World of Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse and neglect are rampant in our society. Elementary school counselors can build a positive school environment for youngsters who suffer from abuse and neglect by implementing such programs as parent support groups to prevent physical abuse of children, programs that help identify potential child abusers, and preventive sexual abuse programs. Elementary school counselors cannot work alone in preventing and treating child abuse. They need to develop close working relationships with social services and other community agencies that frequently advocate for victims of abuse and neglect. Counselors also need to work closely with teachers to help them thoroughly understand signs of abuse and to acquaint them with correct referral procedures. The elementary school classroom may be the most stable setting neglected and abused children experience and may provide the empathy and positive regard needed to help children cope with their ordeal. Elementary school counselors must, therefore, become increasingly sensitive to the victims of abuse and to the need for effective counseling programs in this troublesome area.

A World of Exceptional Children

Many children in our schools are labeled exceptional and find it difficult to accept that they are "simply human." These children need to feel accepted and to use their exceptional characteristics in extraordinary ways. Children who are not so labeled need to learn ways of benefitting from those who are exceptional. The parents and teachers of exceptional children also need to find ways to understand and assist these youngsters. Elementary school counselors should work to build a supportive learning environment for exceptional children. There is a need for strong ties between counseling and special education. Counselors should develop programs for parents of exceptional children. Parents of gifted youngsters, for example, have unique needs resulting from misunderstandings created by myths, stereotypes, and the small number of gifted children in the population. Counselors should also develop strategies to help teachers work more effectively with parents of handicapped children because the teacher is in a position to develop an active, ongoing relationship with parents but may lack the training to provide effective counseling support.

A Technological World

Technological advances have changed education, work, and leisure in our society. Although most people experience the benefits of

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these advances, most also know the anxiety and frustration that accompany rapid technological change as well as the alienation generated by impersonal aspects of technology. Elementary school counselors need to help children develop emotionally and socially in the context of rapid technological change. Counselors often need to deal first with their own concerns about technology before helping children understand the benefits and limitations of technology. Elementary school counselors especially need to acquire competencies with computers, to overcome anxieties about using the technology, and to integrate computer technology into counseling programs (Bleuer & Walz, 1983).

A Changing World of Work

Elementary school counselors face major challenges as they work with parents and teachers to introduce children to an ever-changing world of work (Hoyt & Shylo, 1987). The emphasis on career education, however, seems to have diminished from its peak in the 1970s when the United States Office of Education demanded high visibility for career education programs in schools. This decline in career education at the elementary school level is unfortunate because economic, political, and social changes have brought women and minorities into the work force in large numbers and have altered how children must be prepared to enter the world of work. Elementary school counselors need to enhance children's career awareness, prevent sex-role stereotyping through career exploration programs, and use role models to expand children's occupational aspirations.

Promoting Learning in a Changing World

American society has placed increasing emphasis on the need for children to learn basic academic skills. Parents throughout the country complain that children are not learning to read, write, and perform basic mathematics. Governmental and private commissions have studied the poor academic achievement of children and are asking educators to account for the failure of our schools in this important area. If elementary school counselors are to fulfill their mission in schools, they must collaborate with teachers, parents, and school administrators in an effort to improve children's achievement. Elementary school counselors can positively effect children's achievement (Costar, 1980; West, Sonstegard, Hagerman, 1980). Counselors, for example, can implement and evaluate a ten-session program called "Succeeding in School" (Gerler, 1990). Counselors can also consult with parents on matters related to children's academic progress, implement classroom programs that improve the work habits of children who procrastinate with school work, and use group counseling as a means of motivating children to attend school.

Shaping Children's Behavior in a Changing World

Children's behavior, both in and out of school, is an important concern of parents and educators. The popular media has documented seemingly wide-spread school absenteeism and delinquency among our nation's youth. How to change children's misbehavior and to foster productive behavior are concerns of elementary school counselors. The techniques available to parents, teachers, and elementary school counselors for managing children's behavior are numerous and include modeling, positive reinforcement, behavior contracting, and desensitization. These behavioral change procedures have been thoroughly tested. Although the application of these methods is often difficult, the collaborative efforts of elementary school counselors, teachers, and parents in applying behavioral techniques eases some of the difficulties and increases the chances of success.

Counseling interventions to improve behavior include classroom guidance sessions, small group counseling sessions, and consultation with teachers. Students who receive a combination of these treatment procedures are likely to behave well in the classroom and elsewhere.

Human Relations in a Changing World

Children need to support each other in a world filled with conflict. They must learn and practice the interpersonal skills necessary for their present lives and also for the demands of peer pressure in adolescence. Elementary school counselors must find ways both to challenge and support youngsters in the area of human relations. Counselors can build positive retationships among children and between children and adults through affective education programs in the classroom and through innovative approaches to peer counseling. Elementary school counselors play a major part in developing and maintaining a healthy social climate for children. This aspect of counselors' work is important in part because children's relations with teachers, peers, and family affect learning and achievement. In addition, counselors who strive to improve children's interpersonal skills are helping to ensure that the 1990s and beyond will be years in which society will move forward on the basis of cooperative efforts among the nation's citizens. Finally, the work of elementary school counselors in this area will likely help to produce citizens who strive for productive relations across cultures and nations.

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